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SHORT STORIES

EDITED BY C. ARTHUR PEARSON (OF PEARSON'S WEEKLY)

No. 329. FOR WEEK ENDING APRIL 20, 1895. [PRICE ONE PENNY.

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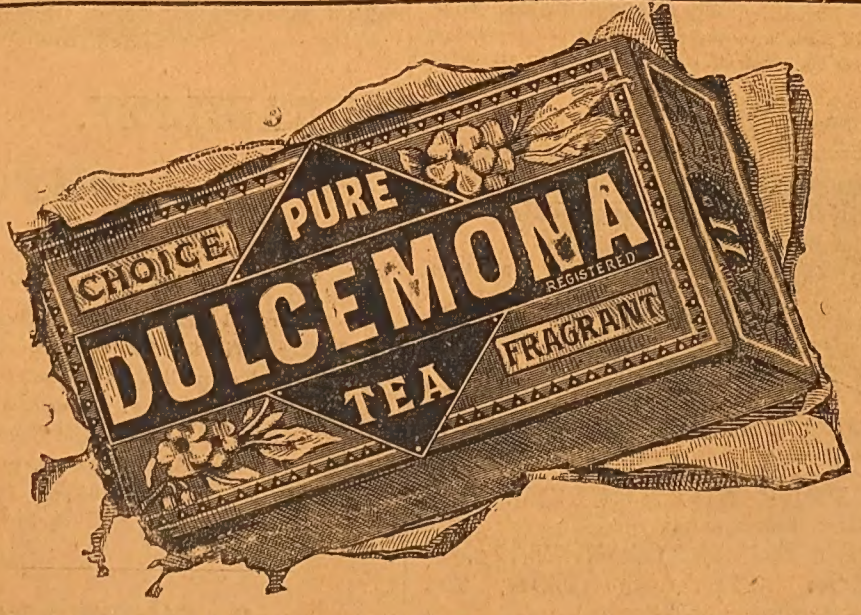

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SHORT STORIES.

EDITED BY C. ARTHUR PEARSON.

No. 329.] *FOR THE WEEK ENDING APRIL 20, 1895.* [PRICE ONE PENNY.

Only a Story

NO one would ever have imagined that the Hon. Douglas Shilletoe, author, humourist, raconteur, and cosmopolitan that he was, loitered on at Eastbourne for the express and only purpose of telling a young lady that he loved her. His intention at first was to remain only two weeks, and then go back to town. He was introduced to the Dinsmores, and promptly fell in love with Mabel Dinsmore, and stayed where he was.

Miss Dinsmore's manner indicated that she tolerated the Hon. Shilletoe's attentions, but that was all. He was a general favourite in the hotel, and his anecdotes and good-humour always made him a most desirable guest at one's table. He was never at a loss for something appropriate to relate. His stories were generally introduced with this short preface, "That reminds me," &c. Everybody would crowd round him except Miss Dinsmore, and evince by hearty laughter genuine appreciation of his anecdotes.

Mabel Dinsmore, however, had ideas which her parents considered more romantic than practical. These ideas had the effect of driving away young men. She measured them by her romantic standard, and invariably found them wanting.

"The men of to-day are negative, and never achieve anything great," she said in sadness to her parents. "Why should I be sacrificed to the modern society men? He knows how to lead a cotillon and how to drive tandem. But how few of them would do anything heroic? and least of all such a man as the Hon. Shilletoe."

However, our hero was in a gay humour the evening he called at the Dinsmore cottage to challenge his fate. The cold hauteur of Miss Dinsmore as she entered the drawing-room did not check the exuberant feeling in him. He related an anecdote of club life, but the young lady did not smile.

"I fear you do not understand me, Miss Dinsmore, any more than you appreciate my poor jokes," he said, rising and looking out of the window.

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"I belong to a Browning Club, and have assisted in unravelling many alleged riddles," she replied, half laughing.

"I hope I am not as complex as Browning?"

"Oh, no; your anecdotes are all newspaper prose. They are for the masses. I confess that my father and mother often recall your jokes after you are gone and laugh heartily. They will miss you when you go."

"Will you miss me?"

"No."

He was silent for a moment and began in a broken voice: "I came to tell you that I loved you. I shall go away and never speak to you on the subject again. Once I thought of relating to you something——"

"That reminded you, no doubt, of this episode in your career; I really begin to appreciate your humour. It is equal to any occasion. For once I desire to hear your joke, and when the climax is reached I trust you will give me the proper cue so that I can join you in laughter."

He left his position by the window and sat down by the centre table. A bouquet of roses in a china vase filled the room with sweet fragrance. Carelessly picking out a large rose he held it in his right hand, slowly turning it round between his first and second fingers.

He began to speak in a low voice: "There is a page in every man's history which he wishes to conceal from the public. Miss Dinsmore, I was once almost as melancholy as Manfred. I was born in America, in an unhealthy locality, and my boyhood was one of chills and fevers. I shall pass over the vain struggle I engaged in to acquire health and education.

"At the age of nineteen I was thin, almost emaciated, and my parents had been told by the doctors that only the most drastic remedies would restore me to good health. It was finally decided that I should go West and lead the life of a cowboy. I was perfectly reckless, and it did not matter to me where I went or what I did. In a few weeks I found myself at Santa Fé, New Mexico. An Englishman, Major Randall, who owned a ranch some distance from Santa Fé, engaged me to herd cattle at the munificent salary of £5 a month in gold."

"Then you really went to work on the ranch, Mr. Shilletoe?" she asked in a tone that seemed less sarcastic than her usual way of speaking to him.

"Yes; but do I bore you by my recital?"

"Oh, no, not at all, for you have not come to the anecdotal part of it yet."

He did not notice, or pretended not to, the cut in her remark. Still holding the rose in his hand he continued his narration:

"The Major had eleven cowboys, I made the twelfth. They were disposed to guy me; but when they saw that I was a good rider and could handle a revolver quickly they soon accepted me as one of them. They mistook my reckless dash for true courage. In a week or so my health began to improve rapidly, and at the end of two months I could ride all day and all night, rope cattle, and swear fluently in Spanish. I talked of shooting vacqueros, if the chance should occur, in a way that raised me in the estimation of all the cowboys.

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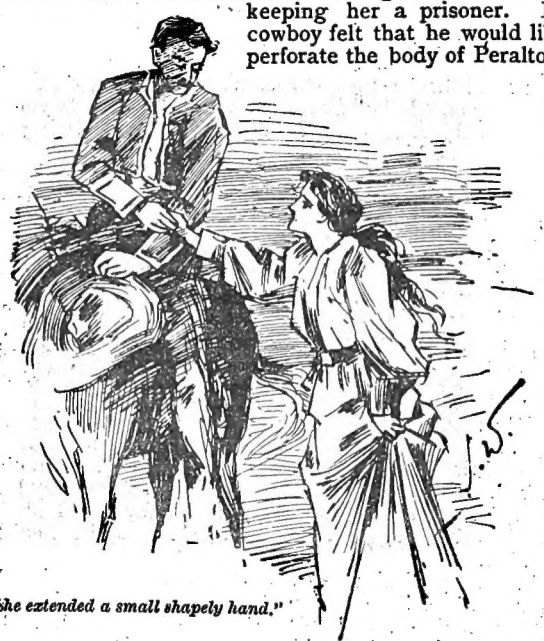
"Little did I dream then that I should play a part in a tragedy, the recollection of which, at times, almost drives me mad. For years I have cultivated the art of relating anecdotes in order to cheat myself into the belief that I possessed a jovial nature. The world knows me as a jester, and thinks I am laughing with it. If I could forget, I would laugh until my heart swelled with joy. But I am wandering.

"The nearest ranch to Major Randall's was Peralto's, five miles distant. He was a rich Mexican bachelor, thirty-five years old, and noted for his hatred of Americans. He had some forty vacqueros, Mexican cowboys, or greasers, and many cattle. After I had had an experience of four months on the ranch, Peralto, our hated neighbour, journeyed to Monterey and married the daughter of a proud, but poor Mexican.

"It was said that Inez did not love him, but her parents persuaded, or, to be accurate, forced her to marry the wealthy ranchero. Instead of taking her on a bridal trip to the City of Mexico, he brought her to his bleak ranch. The Major was a widower, and there was no woman at our ranch to call on Mrs. Peralto. She was never seen out riding, and it became current rumour that her husband was maltreating her, if not actually keeping her a prisoner. Every cowboy felt that he would like to perforate the body of Peralto with



"She extended a small shapely hand."

bullets, and rescue his unfortunate wife. But they could not act upon rumour.

"Returning from a round-up one day I had to pass Peralto's ranch, and, being in a hurry, I spurred my horse to a fast gallop. When I was directly in front of the ranch a great Danish dog leaped the fence, and in a few bounds was at the side of my horse, ready to spring up and tear me from my saddle.

"I drew my revolver, and, without a moment's hesitation, shot the dog dead as he was preparing to leap. It was all done in a second, and the loud report of my revolver seemed to echo for miles round, the afternoon was so quiet and dreamlike.

"I reined up my horse at the gate, kept my smoking revolver in hand, expecting to see Peralto appear and exchange shots with me. I knew he was a dead shot, and my idea was to shoot first, if he had a weapon in his hand.

"A fiendish, diabolical joy took possession of me, but it was short-lived. An apparition of loveliness opened the door and advanced down the walk to the gate. Instantly my pistol was in its holster and my sombrero was doffed. Mrs. Peralto's dark hair was somewhat disarranged, but that did not detract from her beauty. She was young, not over eighteen, and, to me, she seemed a Hebe.

"I saluted her in Spanish, but my pronunciation was bad, and much to my delight she said she spoke English. My apologies and regrets for killing the dog were profuse. I told her I would buy her another dog at Santa Fé, the boys would join with me and purchase anything she wished. She said the dog did not belong to her, but to her husband. She asked me how far I lived from her husband's ranch and the direction. Then she wished to know my name and by whom I was employed.

"Her voice was low and sweet, and seemed to vibrate chords in my soul that had never been touched before. I leaned over the pommel of my saddle and gazed in admiration upon her. She saw and felt that I was sincere. She knew that I would be devoted to her cause from that time. She also knew that if her husband arrived before I departed it meant death to him or me. In a few hurried words I told her that should she ever need protection and friendship to come to our ranch.

"She extended a small, shapely hand; and leaning far over from the horse, I took it in mine. A gentle pressure and asking her not to forget that she had friends near by, I rode away, her soft spoken 'Adio, señor,' sounding in my ears."

The Hon. Shilletoe paused and bowed his head as if he saw and was communing with a departed spirit. He seemed to be thousands of miles away from the woman he had only a few moments before tried to tell that he loved. But she was nearer to him than she had ever been before. His story was a revelation to her. He was not the man she knew when she greeted him so coldly that evening. She almost felt jealous of the Mexican woman.

He appeared handsome to her for the first time. She was dimly conscious that she was excited, and longed, but almost feared, to hear the rest of his story. She moved nearer to him, and though his face was bent down, she imagined he looked sadder than the picture of "Sorrow" she had once seen in an art gallery. And yet the face in the picture of "Sorrow" was that of a hero's, a man who had loved and lost.

"Mr. Douglas," she said softly, "I hope you do not suffer?"

The voice recalled him, as if from a sad reverie, and not answering her question he continued his narration: "I informed Major Randall of everything that had occurred when I arrived at the ranch. In his bluff, hearty way he said I had done the square thing. It was not my fault, he added, that I had not killed Peralto as well as the dog. It was Peralto's luck not to draw up at the right time for a funeral. The Major swore a big oath to the effect that if Mrs. Peralto should ever crook her little finger for aid, she would get it.

"In a week's time the Major was not in a condition to help anyone. His horse fell with him and hurt his left leg. His limb was not broken, but his ankle was sprained, and had swollen to such an extent that he could not leave his bed. He had been in bed a week when the time came for him to make good his promise to Mrs. Peralto.

"It was a moonlight night in August, just such a night as this, when I heard the clatter of the horse's feet on the prairie. I was sleeping on the piazza, my saddle for my pillow, but being restless I lay awake thinking of her. She had been in my thoughts ever since I had seen her and held her hand in mine. I wondered whether I should ever see and speak to her again.

"The galloping horse came nearer, and soon I was up with my weapon in my hand, ready for any emergency. Several of the other cowboys had also risen. I recognised a fine iron-grey horse owned by Peralto, but at first I did not know the rider. He was a boy attired in a Mexican guerilla costume, with a red serape twined loosely round his neat waist. Dismounting at the gate he hurried to the piazza. Lifting his sombrero, the moonlight shone full upon the lovely face of Mrs. Peralto. In an instant I was at her side, leading her up the steps.

"'Señor, I have come for aid, for protection,' she said quickly. 'I must fly, and this very night. My husband will kill me. I have escaped from prison.' In brief, her husband had kept her locked in a room since the day I had killed the dog. His treatment of her was cruel and malicious.

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Mrs. Peralto.

"He had tied her to the post of her bed, and lashed her bare back with his heavy riding whip. He had deprived her of food and drink for two days, and had then offered her the cooked flesh of the dog I had shot.

"The inhuman brutality of his conduct had aroused the sympathy of even old Emanuelo, a grim servitor of Peralto; and his compassion being even more deeply affected by a heavy bribe, he had given her the means of escaping in such a way that no blame was attached to himself.

"We all of us gathered round her to hear the recital of her story. As she rapidly pointed out the facts, each of us gripped his revolver, and muttered a resolution that Peralto should never pass him alive when next we met.

"The suit she wore was one her younger brother used to don on festal occasions. Several years before she married he died, and his request was that she should keep his gay brigand clothes. She desired an escort to a point on the Pecos River where she had a relative living, who would protect and see her safely home.

"Major Randall was roused, and the situation hurriedly explained to him. He sat bolt upright in bed, a sheet round his shoulders, and invited Mrs. Peralto to come in. In a few seconds twelve cowboys stood in line in the Major's room. He asked her to select five of us, and said we would accompany her or die in the attempt.

"She selected me first, because she knew me, and then she picked out Utah Bill, who had been a scout and was noted for his bravery and his kind heart. Utah Bill had killed eight or ten men, but always in self-defence or in a fair fight. Three others, all experts with the revolver, were selected and Utah Bill was made the captain.

"It required only a few minutes for us to saddle our horses and mount. The Major thrust his head out of the window and said: 'Boys, I do not ask you to take an oath that you will see Mrs. Peralto safely to the Rio Pecos, because I know you will, if you are alive.' As the cavalcade started Mrs. Peralto thanked the Major, and said, 'Adio, señor.'

"We rode three abreast, Mrs. Peralto between Utah Bill and myself, and the three other cowboys were in the rear. We dashed along over the rolling prairie, the bright moonlight making it easy for us to follow the trail. Over an hour had passed when Utah Bill turned in his saddle and muttered: 'Carambo, the greaser devils are coming.'

"Far in our rear, black specks could be seen moving rapidly. They were Peralto's greasers in hot pursuit. They kept gaining on us, and yet Utah Bill did not ride faster. Soon we could hear their yells, and we knew that something had to be done. Utah Bill said three of us would have to stop and face the gang. The three cowboys volunteered and Utah Bill told them that they knew what to do.

"One of these cowboys, a superb specimen of manhood, rode up to me and handed me an envelope, with the request that I would open it and write to someone named therein if anything happened to him. Our farewells were short, and a second after we parted they dismounted, shot their horses, and got behind them for breastworks.

"In a little while we could hear the yells of the greasers, and the quick discharge of firearms. It was a fight to the death. They were all three slain, but not until they had killed ten Mexicans, and wounded five or six. They died game, neither asking nor giving quarter.

"Our only thought was to save Mrs. Peralto, and spurring our horses we rode for our lives. As our steeds, in a long, sweeping gallop, carried us swiftly from our cruel pursuers, Inez leaned over towards me and said she had a favour to ask. She desired to fight and die with Utah Bill and myself. I had two revolvers buckled round me, and taking one which had a pearl handle I handed it to her. I could see tears in her eyes, and she said that she had been saying prayers for the brave boys fighting her battle. She did not know then that they were dying to save her.

"I hardly know how far we had gone, but we felt that we had escaped. We checked our horses to a slow gallop, when suddenly, right in front of us, two well-mounted horsemen barred our way. I knew Peralto's horse, with a big white blaze in his forehead, and his chief vacquero, a cruel, murderous greaser. Utah Bill commanded Mrs. Peralto to check her horse and ride close behind us.

"In a cool, matter-of-fact way he said to me: 'You shoot Peralto and I'll kill the greaser.' Four reports, almost together, rang out, and down went Peralto's horse, carrying him with it. The greaser fell from his saddle, shot through the head, and his horse dashed away. Peralto's bullet passed through my coat, and mine, aimed for his heart, lost its mark by penetrating the quickly raised head of his horse. I hoped the bullet had passed through the horse's head and lodged in Peralto's body, for as we rode by he lay prone upon the ground with his dead animal. He was not hurt, but lay still to save his life.

"We had gone a mile or more, when Utah Bill said in a husky voice: 'The game is up, Doug, old boy, I'm done for.'

"He got off his horse, and I was at his side in an instant, just in time to save him from falling.

"Mrs. Peralto quickly came to my assistance. She tore her reboso from her waist, and with it I did my best to staunch the blood flowing from his breast, already covered with the scars of many encounters. Mrs. Peralto put his head in her lap, kissed his brow and wept.

"'Bill, brave old boy, don't give up,' I said, holding the reboso to his flowing wound.

"'Doug, I am on my last round up, and it ain't no use to hold on any longer,' he said. 'I never thought I'd go out with a woman's kiss and tender arms about me. I ain't a bad man, Doug, and I never shot any one in the back. Promise me that you will not let those greasers get my pistols. And Doug, swear to me that you will see her safe. I know you will. Pray! No one has asked me to pray since I was a boy, and she was my mother. Ah! listen! Doug, they are coming, the greaser devils! Shoot Peralto! Aim

"I was at his side in an instant."

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for his heart! Ah, my boy, he is dead! But what is this that I feel? It is my mother's kiss, . . . the last one she ever gave me when I said good-bye.'

"The sun rose, but Utah Bill saw it not. We placed the serape over his body and rode away carrying his weapons and leading his horse. We reached the Rio Pecos and I remained a day, leaving Mrs. Peralto with her relatives. We parted with many promises and vows for the future.

"She was to write to me often, and in a month's time I was to join her. I thought then she was a widow and my affection for her was not concealed. She kept my pearl-handled revolver and she gave me a lock of her hair, and the crimsoned reboso which contained some of Utah Bill's life-blood. Why should I go over that last day of parting love?"

"Oh, don't go over it, brave boy, my Douglas," said Mabel Dinsmore, in tears, and touching the sleeve of his coat. "I know there is a barrier between us. That—that Mrs. Peralto is somewhere in this wide world claiming your first love. But, see, I am calmer now. I am ready to hear the worst."

The Hon. Shilletoe looked at the rose he held in his hand, and in a faltering voice began:—"We buried Utah Bill and the other brave cowboys in one grave, and each of us on the Major's ranch took an oath to shoot Peralto on sight, and also the greasers who pursued us on that fatal night. Peralto never returned to his ranch. He sold it to an Englishman, and we learnt that the Mexican had become a professional gambler.

"I waited in vain for a letter from Inez, but the weekly post brought down from Santa Fé contained nothing for me. I wrote to her that Peralto was not dead, and urged her to come to the States and get a divorce.

"Weeks passed, weeks of anxiety to me, and no line came from her. At the end of two months I could stand it no longer, and I resolved to go to her, if I had to travel the wide world over. I suspected that her parents had somehow prevented her from writing to me.

"I held in my arms Inez Juarez."

"Major Randall accompanied me to Santa Fé, where we were to part, perhaps for ever. The cowboy instinct to see the town got the better of us, and when evening came we visited the gambling places. With me it was anything to pass away the time until morning, when I should begin my journey to Monterey.

"We entered several gambling dens, where Spanish monte was dealt, and lost a few dollars in careless betting. Late in the evening we started to our hotel, when the sound of music from a large gambling saloon attracted our attention. The familiar strains of 'Auld Lang Syne' caused us to pause, and with one impulse we entered. Away at the end of the long room a piano, violin, and flute were making the music, while cowboys, vacqueros, and teamsters stood round the tables betting.

"We passed several tables, when suddenly my eyes fell upon a face that caused my heart to bound into my throat. I had seen that face before. It now belonged to a man with a small black moustache, who sat behind one of the tables, dealing Spanish monte. The Major was startled, too, and whispered, 'Be patient.'

"We stood at the side of the table because a small crowd in front was betting. Suddenly, from the centre of the crowd, a man pushed his way to the front of the table, and sat down by one of the chairs reserved for those who were staking heavily. In an instant my hand was on my revolver, but the Major caught my arm, and said in an undertone: 'Shoot him when he goes out, but not here.'

"Peralto's dark hair had streaks of grey in it, and his face showed signs of dissipation. His fierce black eyes, though, were as bright as ever, and when he contracted his eyebrows, he resembled a fiend. He bet heavily, and, for a time, luck was with him. Then his good fortune deserted him. He grew nervous, and occasionally putting both hands under the table, rolled cigarettes, and smoked them.

"His pile of twenty gold-pieces dwindled until only £40 was left. In the next deal, he staked all his money on one card, and lost. The dealer pulled the pile of gold to his side.

"Peralto put his right hand under the table, and when it came out a stiletto gleamed in it. In a second he leaned over the table and plunged it into the bosom of the youthful dealer. The latter seemed to have anticipated the attack, and quick as a flash exploded a pearl-handled revolver in his face. He fell backwards dead. I sprang to the youth and caught him, as he fell sideways from his seat, the stiletto to the hilt in his bosom. The false moustache on his face was brushed away, and I held in my arms Inez Juarez.

"Looking up she recognised me and whispered my name. 'Will you forgive me, dear Douglas?' she said. 'I could not drag you down with me. I was driven from home. They called me a murderess. I have prayed for you night and day. When I am gone think of me, dear, and forgive me.'

"I held her close to my bosom and kissed her white face. Tears filled my eyes and grief choked my utterance. But she knew I had forgiven and loved her still. Her head resting on my breast, her hand in mine, she muttered with her life's breath, 'Death, after all, is sweet.' Do you wonder now, Miss Dinsmore, why I make my life a jest, a mockery?"

The young lady had both hands to her face and was weeping. She did not answer his question. He stood up for the first time since he began his story and said: "I know that my past will stand between us as a shadow. You will turn from me and think only of my bloody record. I have opened my soul to you as a book, and you have read my heart-words. Again I throw away happiness as easily, it seems, as I fling this rose from me."

Suiting the action to the word, the rose described an arc and fell against the long lace curtains just as an idle gust of wind through the open window swayed the curtain forward. The rose was borne back to his feet.

"Happiness has come back to you, Douglas, just as the rose has?" cried Mabel, and rushing to him threw herself into his arms.

"Mabel, I feel for the first time a serene holy joy. Are you mine, all mine, even after my confession?"

"Yes, Douglas, I shall marry the joker, the common-place man, after all. No one could say anything against you now to shake my faith in you, my hero."

In a week after the engagement was announced the brother of Mr. Dinsmore visited Eastbourne. He was delighted with the choice Mabel, his niece, had made, and told her he knew of no other man he would rather have marry into the family than the Hon. Shilletoe. Late that evening when the two brothers, who had been discussing the Hon. Shilletoe at length, were about to part for the night, Mabel's father said: "I hear that Mr. Shilletoe is a well-known man about town."

"Yes, he is president of the celebrated Storytellers' Club," replied the brother, "and when he marries Mabel and has an interim from love-making, you induce him to tell you the story that elected him president of the club. It is called 'Peralto.' He thought it out one night when he had the toothache."

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THE OTHER WAS HANGED

IN the little town of Oxbridge everyone knew the business of everyone else. And everyone assumed the right of criticism in connection with all the acts—so far as known—and all the plans—so far as guessed—of all his fellowtownsmen. That sort of thing involves heart tragedies in many unfortunate cases.

When Frank Laddon became engaged to Belle Brandon the gossips were pleased to accord what was practically unanimous approval. But when they learnt that Frank and Belle had quarrelled—learnt that she had torn up and burned his letters before his eyes; learnt that she had flung him his ring, in anger and scorn, across the great Brandon drawing-room, and screamed that her voice had become so loud and passion-filled as to reach the ears of curious passers-by in the street—they had nothing to say.

Frank Laddon went home from that stormy interview about as angry as the woman he had left. He couldn't quite recall how the quarrel commenced; he believed that it was commonplace and trivial. The way it had ended was quite enough; memory could never dismiss the disgrace of that.

He should never forget the bitter things she had said. He must always remember the look of hate that had usurped the place of love in her face as she bade him begone. He wasn't quite sure he could endure living in the same town, the same world, with her. He got his revolver out of his dressing-case, and sat down and looked at it.

I don't believe he had any actual intentions of making use of it. If he had—if moodiness had drifted so far as that, in the direction of madness—the touch of the cold metal against his fevered fingers recalled the wandering senses. He was safe—safe against self—when Arnold Ashley knocked at his door, waited a moment for the words of welcome that were not spoken, and then turned the handle, unbidden, and came in.

But the weapon was still in his hand.

"See here, old fellow," said Ashley, hoarsely, "that will never do, you know! Better let me take this thing for a day or two, until you get so that you can see more in the world than the whims of one woman."

He reached over, took the pistol from Laddon's unresisting fingers, and put it in his own pocket. Then, uninvited, he sat down.

"I happened to be passing by Brandon's," he said quietly, "and I couldn't help hearing some of the things the lady said. Laddon, I am sincere in saying I am sorry for you."

He reached out his hand, and Laddon, though he had never quite liked the fellow, took it in the spirit in which it seemed offered.

"I'm sorry," said Ashley again, when Laddon had concluded his unpleasant narrative; "but, after all, it won't make any difference a thousand years from now, and——"

"A ruined life! A blasted future!" cried Laddon impulsively.

Ashley drew his chair a little nearer that of Laddon, and lowered his voice.

"Easy, easy, man!" he cried. "Don't be so great a fool as to stake all the good of life on the love of woman. Love, I grant you, is good; but he who calls it *all* is a liar. Laddon, your confidences incite mine. I am going to tell you two or three things that I have never mentioned to any other person. You wouldn't marry Belle Brandon after what she said to you this morning. Wise conclusion. Who would? I wouldn't marry her myself, vixen that she is, after the fragments of her frenzy that came down as far as the pavement where I stood and listened. And yet, Frank Laddon, I loved Belle Brandon as well as ever you did!"

"You! You loved her? I did not know you were even acquainted with her. I never thought of you as a rival."

"I hadn't the honour of her acquaintance," Ashley said slowly, "but why should that matter? I had never spoken to her, nor she to me. I had never touched her hand—much less her lips," and a red flush ran slowly across his pained face.

"But love needs no voice, no personal contact. I had seen her, and that was enough. As for being your rival," and he laughed bitterly, "I am too much of a philosopher for that. I have long ago ceased to worry myself with efforts in a losing game. Besides—it will make no difference a thousand years from now."

Ashley rose, and walked up and down the room two or three times. He seemed even more agitated just then than Laddon. But he had won peace for himself before he seated himself again.

"Laddon," he said, very slowly and solemnly, "I've long wanted to find some one to whom I could tell the story of my life, my existence—the mystery and horror of it all. Listen, and remember it's all true—every word of it.

"You've doubtless read the theories of the theosophists, with their strange ideas of multiple lives and reincarnation. Well, they are true. The most absurd of all the guesses they make are verities; the most vague of their surmisings, the most shadowy of their imaginings, are facts. The great multitude scoffs and denies; the few believe, and hope; while I—I know! I know! for I have lived and died a hundred times!

"No, Laddon, no—I am not mad. I could thank God if I were. Sit down and listen. For pity's sake, listen! I shall not harm either you or myself. But the mood is on me. The time is ripe. I must speak—I will!

"I can remember almost a hundred earthly existences, almost a hundred physical deaths, and recall each one as clearly and definitely as I can remember the events of the last year of life here in prosaic Oxbridge.

"I've been every sort of man you can imagine—wise and ignorant, saint and sinner, monarch and slave. I have a theory that a man must live, in a general sort of way, every kind of life there is before he reaches the goal of eternal rest. I am full of a belief that my experiences have touched almost all phases of the many-sided possibilities of the life of man—Ah, well! Life is pleasant. Even the loss of love, the death of friends, the biting touch of a master's scourge—a man can endure any and all of these so long as he has the precious priceless boon of life left.

"But death—death! How horrible it is! How terrible! Short, shadowy, transitory. You may call it any and all of these things. But I tell you I'd rather keep a beggar's life, far rather, than go down through the dusky silence of Death's door, and up to the golden glory of the throne and sceptre of absolute dominion.

"Keep still, Laddon, and listen. You've nothing more to do than that. I'm not insane—not now. I never shall be again. I died once, though, raving mad! and once—long, long generations ago—I grew so melancholy I killed myself. You see, old fellow, I've a theory, and my own experiences go far to confirm it, that a man will die a given sort of death only once. I've never had a variety repeated; and I've pretty nearly exhausted the category, I can tell you.

"Let me see—mad once, and I don't quite know, even to

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this day, just what did happen at the very last; suicide once—you don't care to hear the particulars, do you? I was drowned once—that's an easy sort of death, except that the victim finds himself fighting against the inevitable; but I guess no one meets the end gladly, or gives up life happily.

"I froze—with Sir John Franklin. I lost my head—in France. I burned—when Nero destroyed Rome. I was drawn down into a quicksand. I was strangled by a great serpent in a South American forest. I was torn to pieces by a tiger in an Indian jungle. I was slain by a bayonet-thrust, just as I went over the last defences the enemy had raised against us, first in the front line of a gallant band of devoted heroes; and I was shot to death as a deserter and coward!

"An enemy poisoned me, and was never suspected. A friend—a surgeon—labouring to save my life, let his hand falter and his knife slip. I died before him, on the operating table, and the memory of it killed him. Cholera, consumption, small-pox, yellow fever, leprosy——

"You needn't draw away, Laddon; on my honour you needn't. This body, in which I am at present ensconced, is as good and strong, as pure and as clean, as your own. And the real ego—the actual entity—can hardly carry contagion, unless of a moral sort.

"I rode after the hounds in Sussex; the horse stumbled at a hedge—and broke my back. I was driver on a fast train not so many years ago, and I kept my place, held to my duty when some fool blundered with the signals, and sent us into an empty goods train; and so I got a chance to begin my life as Arnold Ashley!

"In '49," he continued, retrospectively, "I started overland for California. The savages ambushed us, and I was one of those so unfortunate as to be taken alive. They——"

But Laddon sprang to his feet. "I can't hear any more of this," he cried, "and I won't. Go home and sleep, Ashley. You'll be clear-headed, sensible, sane, in the morning, I hope."

Ashley rose too. "Thank you for the interest you manifest. I don't doubt I shall be. Thank you, too, for the patience with which you've listened, to what, I don't doubt, you have regarded as horrible—and false as well. I'll spare you further details. I understand how unpleasant you find them. I might say, however, that I believe I've died in almost all possible typical ways—except two—I never died of old age; I was never hanged."

He went as far as the door of Laddon's room, but paused there. "Men who study those abstruse subjects that interest me," he said, "reach queer conclusions sometimes. We find lives drawn together, paired—their interests pooled as it were. Do you know, after to-night I shall feel reasonably certain that our lives are intertwined—one's fate tangled in that of the other; one's powers welded in with those of the other—because of the happy warmth of mutual confidence and confession. One of us, dear old fellow, will die of old age; I'm as confident of that as I am that I ever lived. *The—other—will—be—hanged*!"

He gave Laddon a queer look, something that you might have called an attempted smile of a strangled scowl. "Good-night," he said cheerfully, and went downstairs.

The next evening Laddon was in his room. He had his door locked and bolted. He made no answer when Ashley knocked. It was not until his caller said he had a message from Belle Brandon that he opened the door.

"When I left you last night," said Ashley, without waiting to be seated, and with his shifty eyes looking anywhere but on Laddon, "I met the young woman at the foot of the steps. She asked me if I was your friend. You can guess what I told her. And then—then I walked by her side and saw her safely home.

"It was hard enough to listen to her praises of you, her condemnation of herself. I found it hard to remember that I was a philosopher. I found it dangerously easy to forget that it will make no difference a thousand years from now. She sent a message to you—a loving message, Laddon. 'Tell him,' she said, 'to come to-morrow night!' Laddon, will you go?"

"Go!" cried Laddon. "I'd go through fire itself, and——"

He had risen to his feet as he spoke, and had his overcoat and hat ready. But Ashley's quiet and exasperating voice made him pause.

"Precisely," said that individual. "And perhaps you may. But she said you were not to come till ten. Will you wait, Laddon? Can you?"

"I can—I will, too, since I must. But it's only eight now. Sit down and talk, and——"

"And help you kill time? Sorry, Laddon, but I really can't do it. I have another engagement." So saying he betook himself from the room, and went slowly down and out.

"Eight from ten is two," he said slowly, his speech even more leisurely than his gait. "That gives a long hour for thought, and a short one for action." He filled his lungs with a great sweet draught of the keen and frosty air, and exhaled it vigorously. He drew himself up to his greatest height, laughed softly to himself, hummed a part of some lively tune, and took a step or two that would have been more seemly in a ball-room than in the street.

"It's worth it," he continued doggedly to himself, much as he might have done had someone offered denial to an assertion he had made. "Long life in so good a world as this, and the privilege of dying from no speedier cause than age. And he had his chance. He might have known no woman would have asked him to wait one little hour.

"Heigho! How shall I manage to see Belle Brandon? How shall I secure an interview with her—an interview for the first time—and the last? A message from Laddon will do me the same service with her, I fancy, that a message from her did with Laddon. And as for him and the time, I may safely feel confident that he will be prompt."

"Pshaw!" said Frank Laddon to himself when he was alone, and he shook himself vigorously as if to throw away something unpleasant that had fallen upon him. "I mustn't allow the fellow's words to haunt me so. I have love again, and long life. What could be more absurd than to think of Ashley's fate and mine having any necessary connection? And as for hanging"—he smiled to think how mild and inoffensive a man he had always been.

It was 9.59 when Laddon turned the corner near the Brandons' house. A pistol shot rang out upon the air. He would have thought it came from within the house had not such a thing seemed impossible. But in a moment fear had made him half mad. The door opened. Someone flung himself down the steps, dashed up the street to the corner above, turned, and was gone—swallowed up from all hope or fear of pursuit—lost in the vagueness of the frosty night.

Laddon rushed in at the open door, paused long enough to close it behind him, but was first in the room where a most terrible tragedy had taken place. There, in the brilliantly lighted room, down upon the floor, at the farther side of it, lay Belle Brandon, fatally wounded. She could not speak. She gave him only one look from her tender, sorrowful, loving eyes before she wearily closed them for ever. He caught up the weapon with which the wicked work had been done, and stood there holding it in his hand, gazing doggedly from it to her, when the family and servants came hurrying in.

It was his own revolver!

Would you care for any more that I could find heart to say?

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THE TENTH OF JUNE.

By John K. Leys, *Author of "In the Toils," "My Hindoo Friend," &c., &c.*

Illustrated by Raymond Potter.

SUMMARY.

Geoffrey Dundas, whose life is attempted on the 10th of June, 1883, by a Hindoo barrister at the Law Courts, by means of poison, visits General Sir Arthur Chetwynd at Seacombe Towers, in May, 1884. The General explains that a serious danger threatens the household, and that it will come, if at all, on the tenth of June. The reason for this is that in India, on this particular day, in 1853, Sir Arthur, together with Geoffrey's father (since dead) took part in the looting of a Hindoo temple, and every tenth of June afterwards one of the Englishmen concerned or some member of their families is assassinated. On the last day of May, Amavati, the Rajah of Nagore, visits Sir Arthur, who subsequently refuses His Highness' request for his only daughter Leila's hand in marriage, but gives him permission to repeat his proposal in a year's time. Geoffrey tells Amavati of the danger which threatens himself and the General's household. In view of the condition of affairs, Sir Arthur visits his lawyer to make his will, and, learning from him that his cousin, Captain Byngham, to whom he had intended to marry Leila, is almost penniless, though representing himself to be rich, wills him but a small annuity.

CHAPTER VIII.

An Invitation.

On the following afternoon the General sent one of the grooms to the railway station at Torwyn to fetch the letter containing his will, which Mr. Quinton had promised to send by the guard of the 1.40 train.

"If the guard hasn't got the letter, wait for the next train. It may come by that one. At any rate, wait until you do get it, and don't come back without it." Such were the General's instructions.

Sir Arthur had a nervous anxiety to get the will signed, and he was tormented by a sort of presentiment that he would not be able to execute the document before the tenth of June. This presentiment turned into a feeling of certainty that it would be so when hour after hour went by and George, the groom, did not turn up. The General, who was accustomed to having his orders punctually carried out, was furiously angry with Mr. Quinton, his clerk, the guard of the train, the groom, and everybody concerned. The fact was that George, having met a comrade at "The Green Man," just missed the arrival of the train he had been sent to meet; and very naturally the guard, not being asked for the letter, forgot to deliver it. The telegraph was set to work, and eventually the will, in its big blue envelope, was arrested in its onward journey and sent back.

Met a comrade at "The Green Man."

Before it reached Seacombe Towers, however, a missive arrived there which made the General forget his will and his disappointment together. This was a telegram from Lord Lavington, dated the day before. It ran thus:—

"Yacht *Aurora*,
Plymouth
Sound.

"Can you and Miss Chetwynd join our party on board for a fortnight's run to West coast of Ireland? If you can please wire, and we will send boat ashore for you on Friday afternoon.—Lavington."

The General happened to be in the library chatting with Geoffrey when this message was put into his hand.

"Look at that, Dundas," he exclaimed, tossing the paper across the table to his friend. "If I could accept that invitation I should feel that we were perfectly safe, for this year at all events. No Hindoo could reach us on board Lord Lavington's yacht; and even if such a thing were possible the shortness of the notice would make it impossible for them to lay their plans."

"Surely you will accept this, sir!" cried Geoffrey.

"How can I, with my house full of guests?"

"It doesn't matter. Nothing matters, when weighed against Miss Chetwynd's safety. The Rajah does not intend staying beyond Saturday morning. He told me so himself. To leave one night earlier can make no practical difference. The Misses Stoddart, I am sure, would be very sorry indeed if they supposed that consideration for them had caused Miss Chetwynd to miss a delightful sea-trip—to put it merely on that ground. There remains only Captain Byngham, besides myself. He is a relative. Surely, if you let him see the telegram——"

"I'm afraid it can't be managed, my dear boy."

"Don't throw away the chance, Sir Arthur," pleaded Geoffrey. "Give me the telegram, I beg you. You needn't answer until quite late to-night; for if the reply telegram is sent off early to-morrow morning it will reach Lord Lavington when he sends a boat ashore for letters in the morning. At any rate, there is no need to answer at once."

Without saying another word to the General, Geoffrey went in quest of the Rajah. He found the prince leaning over the balustrade of the terrace, talking in a low tone to Leila; and as it would have been the height of bad manners to interrupt their conversation, Geoffrey retired to a little distance until they separated, Leila going into the house, and the Rajah beginning to pace the terrace with slow step and downcast eyes.

Geoffrey, as he drew nearer, could not forbear to admire the dignity and grace of the Indian's bearing. But for the fact that the Rajah was in blood, in religion, in habits, and sympathies, an alien, any woman, he felt, might be proud to love him. And a jealous pang shot through his breast as he wondered whether, supposing the prince to persevere in his suit, Leila might not learn to think little of the difficulties which had at first seemed to her insuperable.

But there was no time for such thoughts. Geoffrey advanced to the Rajah with a hesitancy of manner which showed that he was unwilling to disturb the prince. Amavati welcomed him with a smile.

"I have come to ask your help in a difficulty," said the young barrister. "I have just learned that Lord Lavington has asked the General and Miss Chetwynd to join a party of friends who are going to take a cruise in his yacht the *Aurora*. I am sure the General would give a great deal to secure this pleasure for his daughter; but, unfortunately, the yacht sails from Plymouth to-morrow evening."

No explanations were necessary for the Rajah.

"In that case we shall leave the Towers almost at the same time," he said. "You and I to-morrow morning, the General and his daughter in the afternoon."

This was said so calmly, so much as a matter of course, that Geoffrey fancied for the moment that there had been a mistake—that the Rajah had intended originally to leave on Friday morning.

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Talking in a low tone to Leila.

"I thought you were to stay till Saturday," he said clumsily.

"Not when our host himself desires to be elsewhere on that day," said the Indian proudly.

"It is awfully good of you," said the young man simply; "but I beg you to remember this, Sir Arthur has not the faintest notion that I am speaking to you on this subject. He would submit to any inconvenience rather than incur the reproach of seeming inhospitable."

The Hindoo answered by a bow.

"In fact"—went on Geoffrey, feeling hot all over—"I'm afraid the General won't thank me for telling you anything about it. I'm afraid both he and you will think me confoundedly impertinent."

The Oriental shook his head almost imperceptibly, and smiled faintly, but made no attempt to speak.

Geoffrey felt more than uncomfortable. His usual caution deserted him. He respected the Rajah so much that he was anxious that he should do him justice; and, forgetting his former resolution to keep silence about the danger which menaced Sir Arthur and himself, he went on:

"The fact is, Rajah, it is not merely a friendly wish that Miss Chetwynd should have liberty to join this yachting party that emboldened me to speak to you. I am before all things anxious that she should be in some secure place by Saturday."

"Secure!" said the Hindoo, "I hardly understand. Secure from whom? Is she not secure in her father's house? In what way is she not secure?"

Geoffrey wished he had not gone so far, but it was too late to retreat. He replied indirectly:

"You remember, prince, that you once advised *me* to withdraw myself from the country—to shut myself up in my house; to retire in some way from the world on the tenth of June in each year! It occurred to me that Miss Chetwynd would be safer on board Lord Lavington's yacht on the tenth of June, than she could be even in her father's house."

The young Englishman was looking straight at the Hindoo while he spoke. Amavati did not start; but an indefinable change came over his dark face as he listened. When he spoke his tone was low and measured, his words clear and penetrating.

"Do you mean that the same danger threatens Sir Arthur Chetwynd and his daughter that you believe threatens you?"

"Nay, how can I tell?" answered Geoffrey, with assumed lightness. "It is not every one who escapes and is warned as I have been warned. The danger is one that cannot be foreseen; one can only guess, and take precautions. But it is a fact that General Chetwynd was in India at the time this vendetta began. For aught I know he, like myself, may be a marked man. All I mean to say is, that I should be greatly relieved if I knew that Sir Arthur and Leila"—the name slipped out unawares—"were to be safe on board the *Aurora* to-morrow evening."

"Your wish shall be gratified as far as I can do anything to further it," said the Hindoo proudly, as he resumed his walk on the terrace.

Before dinner it was practically settled that Lord Lavington's invitation should be accepted, and that the party at The Towers would break up on the following day. Sir Arthur, however, remembered that the Rajah had once expressed a preference for travelling by night, and he insisted on Amavati and his suite spending the next day, Friday, at Seacombe Towers. It was arranged that they should all leave the house at the same hour, late in the afternoon.

After dinner that evening, George the groom presented himself in the dining-room, to deliver over the blue envelope which he had at last obtained, and undergo the dreaded cross-examination. Luckily for him the ordeal took place after the General had dined. Sir Arthur's anger had in part evaporated; and George managed to insinuate that the guard had been too busy to attend to him, and had suddenly started the train before there was time to speak to him a second time. At any rate, the will had arrived in time, and George's offence was forgiven.

"Step into the library," said Sir Arthur to him, "and wait there until I come."

He left the room with the envelope unopened in his hand. Geoffrey, not caring to sit *tête-à-tête* with Captain Byngham, went to the drawing-room.

"Dundas, would you mind witnessing my signature?" said Sir Arthur, suddenly opening the dining-room door.

"He is not here; he has gone to the drawing-room. But if it is only to witness your signature perhaps I could do instead."

"You—ah!—er—. No thank you. Not in this case," said Sir Arthur in some confusion.

He knew that if Captain Byngham were to witness the will the legal effect would be to strike his name out of the body of the will. Byngham knew this too. He had suspected that

The young Englishman was looking straight at the Hindoo.

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Drank three glasses of wine.

the blue envelope might contain the General's will; and he had offered his services as witness on purpose to ascertain the truth. His conjecture was now confirmed, and his face fell. Sir Arthur's tone had not been that of a man who should say—"No, my boy; I don't want to do you such a bad turn." Byngham remembered that the General had hardly spoken to him since his return from Plymouth. Could it be possible that he had heard there some of the rumours about him which were current in Yorkshire?

The captain's face grew dark. He poured himself out another glass of claret; and as he sat there thinking, with the wine untasted before him, his countenance grew blacker and blacker. He had so long considered himself as Sir Arthur's heir, so far as real property was concerned, that he had come to feel that the General had no right to make a change. He felt as if he would give half of all he had in the world to know the truth. But wishing would not help him.

He pushed aside the claret, seized the sherry decanter, and drank three glasses of wine one after another. Then he went out into the hall.

As he passed the library door he heard his uncle's voice exclaiming:

"The postman gone! I particularly wished him to take this letter! Confoundedly provoking! Well, see that you give it to him when he comes in the morning. I will leave it here for you. Don't forget!"

There was a slight click, as if a key were being turned in a lock.

The servant to whom Sir Arthur was speaking said: "I won't forget, sir," and the Captain walked on.

CHAPTER IX.

In the Library.

At one o'clock that night Captain Byngham left his room. He was fully dressed, and he carried an unlighted candle in his right hand.

Gently closing his bedroom door behind him, he went to the great staircase and stood for some seconds, listening. All was dark and silent as the grave. Softly he descended to the hall, his steps making absolutely no noise on the thick stair-carpet. Having reached the hall, he groped his way to a closet where, he had noticed, Leila sometimes deposited her basket of keys. Passing his hands gently along the shelves, he soon satisfied himself that the key-basket was not there. However, he came upon a tool-box, and, selecting a stro chisel, he slipped it into his pocket.

Then he made his way to the library, and, having closed the door, he struck a match and lit his candle.

Captain Byngham had made up his mind that he must know the contents of Sir Arthur's will. It was impossible to stir a step without knowing how he stood in that respect. To inquire openly of his uncle was, of course, impossible. The information must be gained secretly.

Chance had favoured him in this, that for this night—for this one night only—the will was lying under the roof that sheltered him. It was next to impossible that the same chance should occur again, and he therefore determined to run whatever risk might be necessary in order to open and read the will.

He knew it was in the library. "I will leave it here for you," Sir Arthur had said when he was telling the footman to remember to give it to the postman in the morning. From that Byngham concluded that the letter containing the will was either lying openly on a table or locked up, not in a desk or cabinet, but in some drawer or cupboard of which the footman would have the key.

The Captain held up his light and glanced round, but no packet resembling the one he sought was visible. As he stood there searching the room with his eyes, the silence was so profound that imaginary sounds became audible to his fancy. He could almost have sworn that he heard someone breathing, and he glanced towards the larger window almost as if he expected that one of the dark shadows at that end of the room would move forward and confront him.

But rejecting these fancies, Captain Byngham turned his practical mind to the business in hand.

The letter with the will was necessarily too large to be easily overlooked. It was not on either of the tables, nor on the mantel-piece nor on the cabinet. It might be in one of the drawers of the writing-table. Byngham searched them one after another, for they were unlocked. The will was not in any of them. As for the drawers of the cabinet, it seemed unlikely that the General should have entrusted one of the keys of his cabinet to a servant. Anyhow they were all locked, and the Captain had no means of opening them.

But in a recess there was a cupboard, which seemed by far the most likely place for the General to put a document which he did not wish to lock away permanently. It had a door, and the door was locked; but the lock was of quite an ordinary description.

The Captain felt sure that he could force it, and replace the lock so that the damage would escape any casual observer. True, the footman would find the cupboard door open in the morning, instead of its being locked; but that was a risk that must be run. After all, the man might not notice that anything was wrong.

The Captain muffled the chisel in a rug, inserted the edge of it between the door of the cupboard and the door-post, and threw his weight on the handle. Something gave way with a crack; but the folds of the rug deadened the sound. A little more pressure, and, without any great damage being done, the door gave way. The cupboard was open, and Byngham pounced upon a blue envelope lying on a shelf.

Lit his candle.

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There could be no doubt that this was the will. The packet was perfectly fresh, free from dust, and without a crease; and it was addressed to Sir Arthur's lawyer. But, to the Captain's bitter disappointment, it was securely sealed.

He was standing with the document in his hand, considering whether he should break the seal or not, when a slight noise startled him. He looked up.

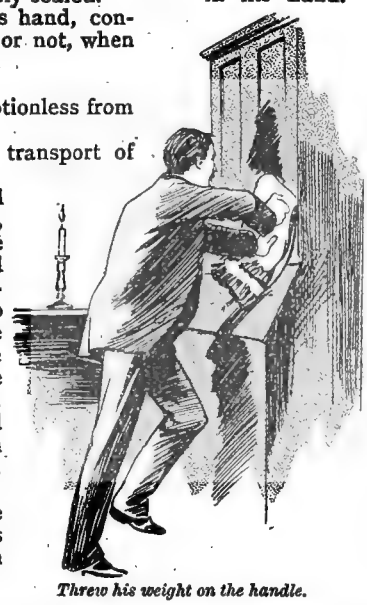
The Rajah's secretary stood before him!

For a second or two Byngham stood motionless from sheer astonishment.

"Confound you!" he cried, in a sudden transport of rage. "What do you want here?"

"Allow me to make it plain to you," said the Hindoo, with grave politeness. "I, hearing a slight noise, as of some one moving about, opened my bedroom door, and listened. I was sure I heard a stealthy footstep, the footstep of a burglar, as it seemed to me. I woke the Rajah's servant." Here Chunder Sen pointed to the door where the tall form of the cook was visible, "and we come quietly downstairs. We see a pale light. We hear a cr—r—r—ack! We enter; and we find the honourable Captain engaged in an act which seems to require explanation. That is all."

The Indian's voice did not vary by the thousandth part of a tone; his full dark eyes were like two spears. But Captain Byngham had plenty of courage. He assumed a lordly attitude.



Threw his weight on the handle.

"Explain my actions to *you!*" he said with a glance of contempt.

"Certainly not. To Sir Arthur Chetwynd," said the Hindoo sternly.

"Mind your own business!" cried the Englishman.

"I have the honour to be your uncle's guest," said Chunder Sen.

Byngham paused. It would be necessary, absolutely necessary, to do or say something to stop this fellow's mouth. But what could he say? What explanation could he offer? Would the fellow take a bribe, he wondered—a bribe simply to hold his tongue? It seemed unlikely. Besides Captain Byngham could not afford a bribe worth offering.

As these thoughts passed through his mind, Chunder Sen stooped and picked up the packet, which the Captain in his surprise had dropped on the floor.

"Give me that!" cried Byngham, holding out his hand for it.

"I imagine this belongs to Sir Arthur," said the Hindoo calmly. "I must put it into his hands. If, however," he added, "you can show me that you have a right to it, that would be quite a different matter."

Innocent as these words were to the ear, there was something in the Hindoo's tone as he uttered them, which made the Englishman throw a quick, sharp look at him. The expression in the Oriental's eyes confirmed the vague doubt. Byngham felt sure that he was not incorruptible. But on what side was the man open to attack?

"An act which seems to require explanation."

"Perhaps the honourable Captain has some right, or, at all events, some powerful reason for wishing to look at these documents?" repeated the Secretary, glancing at the packet in his hand.

"You are right," said Byngham. Then a sudden impulse made him determine to confide in the Hindoo. As matters stood, the confidence could not do harm, while it might possibly do good. "The simple truth is," he added, "I wanted to know how I stand in my uncle's will."

"This is his will, then?"

"I believe so. In fact, I have no doubt of it."

"And you merely wish to read it?"

"Of course. What else do you suppose I would do? What the dickens do you take me for?" cried the Captain indignantly.

Chunder Sen paid no attention to this. He stood balancing the packet in his hand, pondering something in his mind.

"Suppose I stand your friend in this affair," he said. "Suppose I conceal this indiscretion of yours; suppose I allow you to read the will——"

"*You* allow me! I must say you have plenty of cheek! Besides, you can't show me the will. Don't you see it is sealed up?"

The Hindoo looked at the envelope again and smiled. Then he spoke a word or two in Hindustani to his companion; and the big cook vanished from the room.

Chunder Sen appeared anxious to take advantage of his inferior's absence.

"I advise you, make me your friend," he said to the Englishman in a low, earnest tone. "You will not be sorry for it. I can help you in this little affair." He held up for an instant the blue envelope; "and I may be able to help you again."

Twenty-four hours before, Captain Byngham would have knocked any man down who should have suggested that he was capable of entering into a bargain of this kind. Even now he did not believe that the Indian could really help to remove his difficulties. But he reflected that if he accepted the Secretary's offer, he would secure the man's silence respecting his secret visit to the library. And as to any other demands the Hindoo might put forward, it would be time enough to think of them when they were advanced. Still, he hesitated to seem to fall in with the Hindoo's wishes, and thus secure his silence in the meantime. As to any future demand on the Hindoo's part, it might be met or refused when it was put forward.

"I will put your uncle's will into your hands," said the Secretary.

"I tell you it's sealed up!"

"Wait!" The Indian turned his eyes towards the door.

Kuttapani, the Hindoo cook, stole like a shadow into the room.

Chunder Sen advanced, and took from him a thick, soft

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towel which had been loosely wrung out of warm water. This he folded round the packet containing the will, and placed it on the table.

"That won't melt sealing-wax!" cried Byngham contemptuously.

The Hindoo made him no answer, but began to pace up and down the library with slow, cat-like steps, his eyes resting on the ground.

The Captain threw himself into a chair and waited. As he sat there, he asked himself what the Hindoo's motive could possibly be in aiding him as he was doing. But to this question he could find no answer.

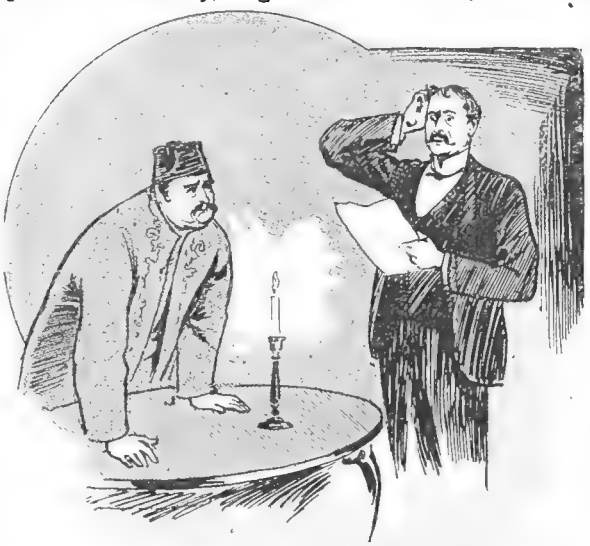
When some minutes had elapsed, Chunder Sen removed the towel from the packet. The envelope was an ordinary, long "official" envelope, opening at one end. This end had been sealed; and the seals remained intact. But the moisture from the damp, warm towel had dissolved the gum which fastened the body of the envelope together. It lay half open, showing the will inside. The Hindoo carefully drew out the document, and handed it to the Captain, who unfolded it with fingers that trembled with excitement.

As he read, the Hindoo busied himself in smoothing the envelope, and gently removing some of the moisture with a cambric handkerchief.

He was still busy doing this when he happened to glance at his companion. The look in Byngham's face positively startled him. It was the face of a man maddened with rage.

"So it is as you feared?" he said gently.

The answer was a muttered curse. Unconsciously the Captain was crushing the instrument in his hand. With firm hand the Hindoo took it from him, and quietly read it himself.



"So it is as you feared?"

"You are done with this, are you?" he said when he had finished.

"Yes—no," replied Byngham. "Let me see it again. I want to make sure."

He read once more the clause which had caused him such strong emotion—that in which the General bequeathed him an annuity of two hundred pounds, paid quarterly.

"If he had wanted to insult me he couldn't have struck harder," he muttered to himself. "But I can see what it means. Some prating fool has told him how hard-up I am; and 'kick him, he's down,' that's his motto. When I saw that about 'my consent,' I might have known the game was up."

It was as plain to Captain Byngham's mind as if the General had put his reasons into the body of the will. One country gentleman does not bequeath another a small annuity in the ordinary course of things. That, coupled with the provision that the annuity should cease if he married Leila without the testator's consent, was tolerably good evidence that such consent would not be forthcoming.

Yes, the thing was done. There was no doubt of it. There was the General's signature, firm and unbending as the General himself, and witnessed by Geoffrey Dundas.

At a sign from the Secretary Kuttapani went to the door of the cupboard; and in a few minutes removed the traces of the Captain's violence and refastened the lock. Meanwhile Chunder Sen replaced the will in the envelope which he carefully adjusted, and placed the packet under some heavy volumes.

"You are in trouble; perhaps I can help you," said the Hindoo to Byngham.

"How can you help me?" said the Englishman rudely. "If you could burn that will! But no; of course he could easily make a new one."

"I may be able to help you," repeated the Hindoo, his dark eyes fixed on the Captain's face. "But now it grows light. Suppose you meet me on the terrace after breakfast?"

"What can you do for me?"

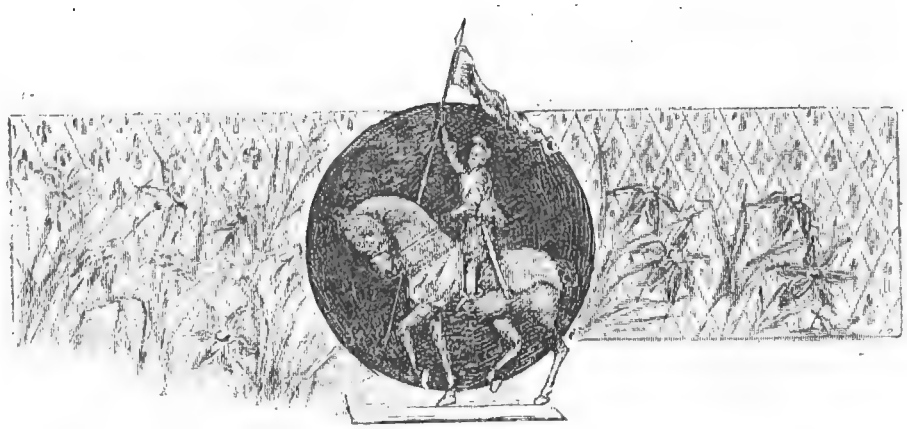
"That is for me to discover when you confide to me the extent and the manner of your loss," said the other gravely.

"All right," said the Captain with a bitter laugh; "I'll meet you on the terrace. But I fancy you'll find my ailment beyond the power of your physic."

The packet restored to its former appearance, was replaced in the cupboard; and Kuttapani deftly turned the bolt of the lock with a bit of wire.

Chunder Sen, with a polite inclination to the Captain, bent forward and blew out the candle. Then all three silently left the room.

(*To be continued.*)



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"ONCE more, Mr. Elmore, I repeat I cannot entertain your proposal for my daughter's hand."

"But, consider, Mr. Bulsale, Ethel and I love each other to distraction."

"Pshaw!" contemptuously exclaimed the unrelenting father of the dear girl I fondly adored.

I, Edward Elmore, had been for a good half-hour doing my very utmost to convince the old gentleman that it would be utterly impossible for him to discover a better way of inaugurating the new year than by receiving me as his son-in-law elect, and by doing so cause two fond hearts to beat with joy; for why should I desire to conceal the fact that I had the very greatest cause for believing that my darling Ethel fully reciprocated my consuming passion?

That I had signally failed to make the old gentleman see the interesting subject in the light I wished him seemed only too plain.

I was tolerably alive to the reason why Mr. Bulsale did not look with favour upon my suit. My financial position was certainly not of the strongest, and there was a certain Mr. Sowerbutt, a middle-aged individual, short (not of cash) and fussy, and proprietor of "Sowerbutt's Sauce for the Million."

As the very particular crony of Mr. Bulsale, the condiment concocter was naturally a frequent visitor at the former's residence at Brixton. I half suspected that Sowerbutt had a silent regard for Ethel, having, on more than one occasion, caught him furtively casting 'sheep's eyes' at my darling, when he had doubtless imagined himself unobserved.

How I had obtained a footing in the Bulsale mansion was in this wise. I was a clerk in the office of a fine old-crusted firm of family and conveyancing solicitors. Mr. Bulsale was an "eminent" auctioneer, and revelled in the satisfaction of possessing an extensive and lucrative business, and, as he had many transactions with our firm, he and I were in consequence thrown much together. After a while Mr. Bulsale seemed to take a fancy to me, and invited me to dine with him at his house, and that visit proved to be the forerunner of many more.

The keen man of business, who ever had his eye on what is termed the main chance, found me useful to him in many ways, especially in what may be called the literary part of his calling. I refer to the composition of those enticingly flowery advertisements setting forth the varied attractions of charming country retreats and the delirious delights appertaining to magnificent mansions, which from time to time Mr. Bulsale received instructions to offer for sale to a yearning public.

I reflected that to keep a watchful eye on Simon Sowerbutt I must remain on good terms with Mr. Bulsale; so with this laudable object in view, I said, with an air of apparent resignation:

"I trust, Mr. Bulsale, that, although you cannot bring yourself to look upon me in the light of a possible son-in-law, you will not prohibit my occasionally looking in upon you as before?"

"Come and see us whenever you like, young man; but mind, don't let me catch you making love to Ethel."

I thanked him and then remarked, "I think I may with truth say, Mr. Bulsale, that I have always enjoyed the little music that your daughter and—myself have been in the habit of—of providing. Those little duets, for instance—you will not——"

"Well, no," the unsuspecting Bulsale said slowly. "I see no reason why you should not as before indulge in a little music, especially as I like it so much!" Of course, Bulsale was nothing if not a little selfish.

Thought I to myself, if two fond hearts, with the assistance of a piano and a sheet of music, cannot make good use of the opportunities presented, and at the same time bamboozle the unbending parent, my name is not Edward Elmore.

Again I thanked the old gentleman, and then addressed him: "You have been candid enough to indicate that you have no personal objection to me, only you consider my means inadequate to maintain a wife in the manner you would deem satisfactory."

"That, young man, is precisely the state of the poll."

"And a very unsatisfactory condition it is for me," I answered ruefully. "Now, would you mind telling me under what conditions or circumstances you would be willing to bestow your daughter's hand——"

"And fortune," put in Mr. Bulsale quickly.

"That, sir," I answered quietly, and, I trust, with dignity, "was not my thought; I should be willing to take Ethel without a penny. Try me."

Mr. Bulsale said nothing, but took a silent pinch.

"Under what circumstances," I repeated, "would you consent to Eth—your daughter, becoming my wife?"

"I should be willing to listen to you," he said, "when you possessed an income of, say, seven hundred a year."

My heart sank to zero. Bulsale might just as well have stipulated for a million.

"Or," added the old gentleman, a curious smile diffusing itself over his somewhat broad visage, as if he had just thought of something which mightily tickled him, "or Ethel might be yours, to have and hold, when I knock her down to you;—once—twice—for the third and last time, going—going—gone!"

I nearly lost all patience with the old fellow for making so absurd, not to say vulgar, a joke upon a subject so sacred to myself. Then it flashed across me that I, too, but a few minutes previously had been guilty of similar flippancy, and I thought I had better bottle up my wrath and take my leave; so, wishing Mr. Bulsale good morning, I made for the door.

"Good morning, my dear sir," responded the eminent salesman blandly.

That evening, as the clocks were striking eight, I was on Mr. Bulsale's front doorstep, armed with a new piece of music, over which, a few minutes later, Ethel and I were bending our heads in delightful proximity, while papa, in his favourite chair, took alternate whiffs at his churchwarden and sips at his glass of mountain dew.

In soft whispers, through the music, I informed Ethel of all that had transpired during my interview with her revered but unbending father. The darling girl quite agreed with me regarding the untimeliness of the pleasantry her father had indulged in, though at the same time she devoutly wished she could be "knocked down"—to myself, of course.

During the evening Sowerbutt put in an appearance and the piano had to be closed. Then followed a discussion over a sale of a small but valuable lot of antique furniture, which Mr. Bulsale was going to hold in a few days at his extensive mart. There was also the proof of the advertisement to look over, to which, as usual, I added a little embellishment.

Mr. Bulsale descanted eloquently upon the beauty and value of several of the articles which would very likely go into the

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broker's hands for a mere song; "particularly," he observed as he warmed up professionally, "a large cabinet or wardrobe beautifully carved, and very substantial, no gimcrack work."

"Just the very thing I should like," exclaimed Sowerbutt. "It would come in handy in case—if ever—I should get married, you know." And the man of sauce cast a look at Ethel, which no doubt he intended should convey a world of significance.

At eleven we broke up, Sowerbutt and I going part of the way together to our respective homes. The purveyor again intimated his fixed determination to secure the large cabinet, provided the figure was not run up too high. Sowerbutt was a very careful, not to say stingy, man, considering the pot of money he had made with the "Sauce for the Million," which by the way, candour compels me to admit was a very relishing condiment, and deserved the enormous sale it enjoyed.

As I was seated at my modest morning meal on the day of the sale of the antique furniture, I fell to musing on the probable amount old Sowerbutt would bid up to for the ancient cabinet.

"Tallygraff, sir!" said Mary Jane, bursting in upon me.

I could never get that handmaiden to say telegram. Opening the buff-coloured despatch I read: "Purchase at sale this morning Lot Number Eleven at any cost. Do not fail your Ethel."

"So, Mr. Sowerbutt," I murmured, "you are going to be done out of your contemplated purchase. But what on earth can Ethel want with the cabinet, and at any cost, too?" However, I had little time to lose in vain speculations, so set off to the scene of operations, looking in at the office on the way to make excuses for my absence. I arrived at the mart just as the third lot was being knocked down. Bulsale seemed surprised on seeing me enter, while Sowerbutt, who was close to the rostrum, looked as dark as his own sauce; as though, in fact, he had intuitively guessed the cause of my presence there.

Lot ten was quickly reached and disposed of. The auctioneer then, clearing his throat, assumed an air of extra importance, and commenced to eulogise "Lot Number Eleven in the catalogue," speaking of the "noble piece" of antique furniture in terms so feeling, that any one might fairly have been excused for imagining the article offered had belonged to a long line of Bulsale's ancestors.

When Mr. Bulsale had apparently exhausted his category of laudatory phrases, he actually wound up by the way of peroration:

"The article, ladies and gentlemen, needs no words of mine to convince anyone of its uniqueness, there it is to speak for itself."

"A sovereign," bid a venturesome spirit.

The auctioneer remarked that it was rather too early in the day for joking; however, he would take the bid just by way of making a start.

"Let's see inside of it," suggested one of those swell wits often seen at auctions.

"Certainly, if you desire to, sir, though I may tell you there is nothing, not even a shelf: but should any one require shelves fixing, the cost would be only trifling. John, unlock the cabinet."

"The key isn't in it, sir," answered the attendant.

"It was an hour ago, I'm certain," remarked Mr. Bulsale. "However, it's of little consequence. Sorry we can't oblige you, sir, just at the moment, the key has evidently been mislaid."

"Supposing, after all, there is something inside, will it go with the article?"

"I pledge you my word," answered Mr. Bulsale, with mock irony, "that the fortunate purchaser of that work of art may justly claim anything that may happen to be in the interior. I trust everybody will now be satisfied, and allow us to go on with business."

There is no need to dwell on the progress of the bidding for Lot Number Eleven. Besides myself there were two or three other keen competitors, and so, even if I had not been there with such imperative orders, Sowerbutt would have failed to secure the coveted piece of furniture at what he considered a reasonable price; he retired from the field vanquished when the bidding had reached £12 10s. Eventually the cabinet fell to my bid of £37 15s., and a rather exorbitant figure I considered it. Of course, after all, I was but an agent in the matter.

As there were not many lots to be disposed of, I elected to stay till the sale was concluded, thinking that it was just possible I might learn something more respecting my purchase. I pushed my way through the crowd into Mr. Bulsale's office behind the saleroom and seated myself facing the doorway through which I had just entered, my eyes the while resting upon the antique cabinet, which had been so placed that the back of it was partly across the entrance to the private room.

I had been sitting a minute or so musing over the unusual events of the morning, when, to my amazement, I saw—there was no delusion—the back of the wardrobe slowly opening towards me, like a door, disclosing a space of four or five inches, and through this aperture there appeared a small, feminine hand, whose tapered fingers dangled invitingly a scrap of paper. Acting on the impulse of the moment, I rose and quickly transferred it to myself. The little hand was thereupon instantly withdrawn, and the opening closed.

I could scarcely believe my eyes as I read on the paper I had so mysteriously become possessed of as follows:

"So I have really been knocked down to you, dear. Now you will understand my telegram. You, of course, will know how to complete the stratagem begun by Ethel!"

"Whew! The clever darling!"

The next minute Mr. Bulsale entered, exclaiming:

"There, I've just finished. But where is Ethel?"

Before I could reply, the back of the antique cabinet again opened, but wide this time, and Ethel—looking somewhat flushed—stepped forth. Advancing towards us, she said demurely:

"Here I am, papa, none the worse for being 'knocked down' by you."

Papa Bulsale's face was a study, as he looked first at Ethel, then at myself.

"Explain?" he gasped out, as he sank helplessly into an easy chair.

"It is all my doing," Ethel quietly remarked. "Edward knew nothing of the actual fact till a moment ago. You see, papa, I discovered yesterday that the cabinet had a revolving back, and at once, as if by inspiration, the idea occurred to me to be sold along with the furniture, and so—well, you know the rest, dear papa, and I belong to the purchaser of the antique wardrobe, 'Lot Eleven.' Here is the key."

The ingenious damsel put out her hand to me, and, taking the dear little palm, I turned to the dazed Mr. Bulsale, saying gravely:

"I claim this lady according to the conditions of sale as well as by your own words, of which, I dare say, you do not require reminding."

As soon as the eminent auctioneer realised how beautifully he had been cornered, he stormed dreadfully; but the torrent of his wrath soon exhausted itself, and he calmed down wonderfully, even to go so far as to designate his friend Sowerbutt a mean fellow for not bidding above me.

On the auspicious occasion when darling, daring Ethel became my wife, the order of things customary at such times was somewhat reversed in the case of Mr. Sowerbutt. Instead of his making the bride the customary present, the latter sent him a handsome gift—Lot Eleven! He accepted it.

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A SAFE HIDING PLACE

MISTRESS BARBARA TREVETHICK walked alone upon the terrace. It was the close of a heavy spring day; the sun had gone down and a chilly evening breeze blew fitfully and moved the long grass of the uplands to and fro; the twilight was dark in the distance, and had already stolen all the colour from the fading day; it was cold—cold!—and Barbara drew her mantle tightly round her erect figure and pulled her hood closely over her forehead as she paced up and down and watched the dreary death of the day.

She had reached the end of the terrace and leaned wearily against the wall, when suddenly a whispered "Barbara!" reached her, and she started, all alight with life and love at once.

"Barbara—sweetheart!" and a shadowy figure swung itself up and over the low wall from the shrubbery below.

"Oh, Ralph, Ralph!" cried Mistress Barbara, joyfully. But she shrank back at her lover's pale face. "Where is my father?" she whispered, with a quick sob.

"I do not know, sweetheart—safe, I trust, but in good sooth I know nothing but that it is a marvel I have reached you safely, and that I am not here for long. The day is lost, and the Roundheads are after us all over the country. I managed to gain the shelter of the wood, lay quiet awhile, and then crept hither through the twilight, for I had sworn to see my sweet mistress's face again, if I died for it!" Sir Ralph's voice was hoarse and broken, his gay cavalier plumage was soiled and torn, and his long hair lay uncurled over his handsome face. "Can you hide me here this night?" he went on, "for I am too spent to go further, I fear."

"Hide you! Yes, indeed—I can put you in a hiding-place where all the Roundheads in the world will never find you," cried Mistress Barbara, looking lovingly up into the face of the cavalier as she hung on his arm. "Perhaps my father may reach home, too—God grant it!—there is room for both. But how can I get you in? The servants must not see nor hear. Wait here for me; crouch down in the shadow, and I will be here anon."

"Nay, Barbara," cried her lover, holding her back, "you must not run any risk for me; sooner would I go forth and face the Ironsides as I am." But Barbara turned, and for one moment pressed her face closely against his bosom.

"Dear heart, I run no risk—and if I did, what matter? You know well I would throw down my life gladly to please you but for a moment. I would do all—all for you, except"—with a sudden catch in her breath—"except give you up to another woman!"

Sir Ralph laughed—an easy, self-satisfied laugh. Even in the midst of his peril and bodily fatigue it was still a delicious tribute to his vanity to feel that beautiful Mistress Barbara loved him like this. He smoothed her thick, wavy hair, and murmured a loving word or two as he bent over her, and then she turned swiftly, and went quickly along the terrace and into the darkness beyond.

Sir Ralph, left to himself, looked carefully round him, to see if he had been followed. All was silent and safe, and he leaned back against the wall in the corner of the terrace, and folded his arms, to wait patiently. "I wonder," he muttered to to himself, with his easy smile, "I wonder whether little Lettice is thinking of me? By 'r lady, I must be careful; that black-browed goddess of mine will be giving me up to the Roundheads if she guesses I have swerved a hair's-breadth from her worship. And she is twice as handsome as Lettice. 'Tis hard to choose betwixt them, and meanwhile, I had best make love to both." In a few moments, Mistress Barbara returned stealthily.

"All is well," she whispered, "Old Marion and the others are all downstairs, and I must take you in by my own private doorway. Tread softly, and come after me."

Sir Ralph stepped after her as quietly and quickly as he could. The moon had now risen, and her silver light was as bright as day, but the shadows fell in heavy black masses, and, as they kept close into the wall, they were invisible. Barbara glided on until she came to a small, arched door, which stood ajar, and which she softly pushed open. It revealed a winding stone staircase, built in the thickness of the wall, and she ran up swiftly, pushed back a sliding door at the top, and they stood in a small chamber heavily hung with faded stuff, and furnished barely, with a few stools and tables.

"No one comes here but myself," panted Barbara, flushed and out of breath with the rapid ascent, as she turned to secure the door after them. Sir Ralph looked round and his face fell somewhat.

"Is this my hiding-place, sweet mistress?" he asked ruefully. "In truth, if the Ironsides come to seek me they will not have far to look."

"Nay, nay," smiled Barbara. "Be not so hasty. Look hither, and see if I cannot hide you safely for a while." As she spoke, she touched a concealed spring in the panelling behind the faded hangings—the wood slid creakingly back and revealed an iron door which she unlocked by a curious little key. It opened, and revealed another small chamber beyond.

"Ah, this is better, in good sooth!" said Sir Ralph, stooping down to look through the opening.

"Here you can remain in safety, dear heart," whispered Mistress Barbara. "No one knows of this place but my father and myself. I will bring you each day what you need, and when pursuit is over, there will be no need for hiding."

"'Tis marvellously well-contrived," returned her lover, stepping down through the narrow doorway and surveying his hiding-place. It was a small, vaulted room, and the small lamp Mistress Barbara carried shone upon the rough stone walls and on a couch in the corner, and a small stand or table which formed the whole of the furniture. "And I am your prisoner here, sweet Barbara, and the key that keeps me is in your hands; deal gently with me, sweetheart, for 'tis a pleasure to know my fate depends on the lady of my love only."

"Yes, you are indeed in my hands," murmured Mistress Barbara, leaning her beautiful head upon his shoulder with a loving gesture. "Are you content? And indeed, if you are true to me as I to you, what need have you to dislike it? See, I have placed some food on the table, and here is the lamp; to-morrow I will come again, and till then I must say farewell, for old Marion will be seeking me. Alack! you have no warm covering. Here, take my mantle—'twill serve you till I come again. And now—and now—tell me once more you love me well, and say good-night."

Sir Ralph stooped his lofty head and looked in her half-veiled eyes. "I will tell you that as long and often as you will, dear love. Foul befall my lips and my heart if ever they are false to the love I bear you! Sweet Mistress Barbara, good-night, and fair slumber to you—I shall look for your sweet face again to-morrow." And Mistress Barbara, glad and content, passed through the narrow opening, and, turning round once more before the heavy door fell behind her, breathed softly, "To-morrow."

II.

NEXT morning Barbara rose betimes. Joyful, and yet anxious was her heart as she woke to consciousness, for though her lover was safe, she had yet heard no news of her

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father. Stout old Sir John Trevethick had ridden out to battle for the King as gaily as any of the younger Cavaliers, and his daughter hoped to have news of him before the day was over. "God grant he may come home safe," she said to herself, "but at least I will not lament while there is hope!"

She wished to get a store of provisions for her imprisoned lover before the servants were about the kitchen and lower halls, and dressed herself quickly. Her sleeping room had two doors; one opened upon the main staircase, and one upon the little chamber behind the panelling of which lay the concealed room. She chose the latter way as being a quicker descent, and as she went down the narrow stair, her eye fell upon a small white packet tied with ribbon.

"He must have dropped it as he came up last night," thought she.

"'Tis well that none have been here before me." She stooped, smiling, to pick it up. "*My* letters, belike," she whispered, as she noticed the papers covered with writing, and then, as she held them, the loosely tied ribbon fell apart, and two or three letters dropped to the floor.

Mistress Barbara could read and write well, and with a sudden shock, that sent all the blood from her face, she saw that the characters were none of her tracing, though a woman's.

"Oh—oh!" she cried softly to herself, pressing both hands upon her bosom. Then she picked up the strange letters, went back into the little room, and sat down.

How long she sat there she never knew. There lay the fateful letters upon the table in the bright morning sunlight, and there she sat with her eyes fixed upon them and a furious passion rising in her heart. Who had written those lines? What woman dared to write letters to *him*—her lover? And why had he preserved them with such care and carried them with him?

"I will know all," said Mistress Barbara hoarsely, "'tis my right!" And she gathered up the scattered letters with hands that trembled strangely.

There were four or five of them, and they were all written by the same hand, and signed—"Lettice." Mistress Barbara read them all through, with one hand clenched upon her heart, which was like a burning fire. They were answers to letters written by her false lover—coquettish, frivolous letters, that yet had a burden of true love running through them. There were complaints of his absence, pretty messages of love, and little scoffs at his supposed entanglement with a country love.

"Did you not vow to me a hundred times," wrote the lady, "that you loved none but me, and that black-browed Mistress Barbara Trevethick had but served to while away your weary hours until you could return to me again? Out upon you; I hear that you are ever with her: and though I know full well that you love but me, yet I am not at ease till I hear from you. But I will believe none of it, dear love, for in truth I love and trust you well."

Then, again, in a later letter she wrote:—

"Sweetheart, right glad was I to receive your last letter, and yet more glad when I read your loving words. In truth I did wrong to doubt you, even for a time; but 'twas but through the love I bore you. Yet, in my joy, I can find some thoughts of pity for poor Mistress Barbara. Proud and passionate, she may be, as you say—yet, must she suffer the more for being so over fond."

"Now, by my faith!" burst out Mistress Barbara, with terrible eyes flaming out of her white face—"they shall see if I be 'over fond' or no!"

She dashed the letters to the ground, and walked up and down in a tempest of passion. To and fro, to and fro, she paced, and the love which had filled her heart turned to hate, and a consuming desire for revenge. And yet—"Oh, how I have loved him!" cried Mistress Barbara, wringing her hands in agony. "Over fond! Proud and passionate! Oh! —that I—*I* should be scorned like this!"—and all the jealousy and cruelty in her nature leapt to life in the depths of her slumberous eyes.

The storm of her passion had made her deaf and blind to everything beside, and there had been a knocking at her door for some minutes, while she swept up and down the little chamber with all her thoughts bent upon her wrongs, and the vengeance she must take for them. He should die! He should be given up to the Roundheads! Nay—that would touch her father's honour; there should be no treason in his house. She would face him herself, and tell him all, and then he should die!

The knocking grew louder, and she stopped and gazed vacantly around her. Her heart was burning like a red-hot coal and sickened her with pain; her dress was disarranged, and her beautiful hair hung loose over her shoulders; with haggard eyes she saw the letters lying on the floor, and mechanically picked them up and hid them in her bosom, and then cried hoarsely, "Who is there?"

"It is I, Mistress Barbara," cried old Marion, from outside. "Let me in, dear heart; I have heavy news for you."

Barbara drew back the heavy bolt and let in her old nurse—a withered, nut-brown old woman, down whose deep-lined cheeks the tears were running fast.

"Oh, my dear lamb!" she cried, "I have ill news for you —the Lord help you to bear it!"

Barbara had sunk down upon a seat in the window, and turned her eyes slowly upon the old woman without a word.

"There is one just ridden hither with news from your father, who is safe and well, God be thanked for it! but he sends word that he fears lest Sir Ralph be taken prisoner by the bloody Roundheads—a murrian on them—or else slain. He was last seen fighting among them, one against many; and now no man can find a trace of him. Alack! alack!" cried Marion, bursting out into renewed sobs and tears; "he was the properest gentleman my eyes ever rested upon; always gallant and gay, and a pleasant word and a 'God save you' for every one, and now to think he may be stark and stiff, with a pike-thrust through his brave heart!"

Barbara stared at her silently for a heavy moment. Thick and fast beat her heart—the quick throbs seemed to echo through the chamber. Lost! Dead! Yes, to all but her. What did he say yester eve? In *her* hands? Yes, he was her prisoner; and there before her lay the little key which alone would open the heavy door. Her stony face flashed suddenly into terrible resolve. "Yes, he is dead!" she cried, and, rising, she flung the key out of the window into the well that lay beneath. It fell with a splash into the dark water; one little splash, and a few ripples slowly widening out, and then nothing. Nothing to show that a man's life had been thrown away.

"Come, take something to eat," said Marion.

"I want nothing—leave me," said Barbara, turning away.

"You want nothing? Well, it will not be long ere you come and want your dinner. A young thing like you must eat, when all's said and done—and hunger is hard to bear." The old woman turned to go away.

Barbara stood as if stricken to stone. "Hunger is hard to bear." The consequences of her hasty deed rose up before her in all their horror. To die—that was just! But to be hungry—to starve! The lamp would go out. The darkness would be thick all round him. He would cry to her in the dark to save him and no one would hear.

"He would starve in the dark. I forgot!—I forgot!—I did not mean *that*," she cried in a hoarse whisper. She clutched at her throat, but her voice was husky and died away. Oh, the despair that shone out of her great eyes!

"Sweetheart, sweetheart, what is it?" cried old Marion, rushing to her side.

But Mistress Barbara suddenly found voice, and, with a heartbroken cry of "Ralph!" she fell upon the floor with a scarlet stream of blood staining her white skin and snowy linen.

And in the confusion that followed, and the mourning grief for the dead girl, all trace of Sir Ralph was lost for ever. He had disappeared from the face of the earth; and if cries, entreaties, or prayers echoed in that hidden vault, there were none to hear. And in a day or two, even while Mistress Barbara lay dressed for her burial, they must have grown fainter and fainter, and at last dropped into silence, in the dark and alone.

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My Dear Old Friend

I HAD just come out of the Army and Navy Stores, and was threading my way through the somewhat unnecessary collection of dogs that besiege the entrance to that otherwise excellently conducted institution, when I caught sight of a face that seemed familiar to me. It was that of a man about my own age, with bronzed features and a somewhat attenuated figure. As I was trying to recall when and where I had seen him before, our eyes met, and I immediately perceived that our recognition had been mutual; for he came towards me with a frank expression of pleasure and held out his hand, saying, "Halloa, old fellow, who'd have thought of seeing you here?"

I don't know why he said this, and of course I don't attempt to defend it; but it is a style of address affected by some men who are as profoundly astonished if they meet you in the Gaiety Restaurant as if they had run across you in the mines of Siberia or the exercise yard of Millbank Prison. I felt a little bit annoyed at his want of originality; however, I smiled pleasantly, and said, as I shook hands, "Well, if you come to that, who'd have thought of seeing *you* here?"

We stood opposite each other for a few seconds—I simpering somewhat emptily at the nature of our greeting, and struggling to recall his name; and he with his head slightly on one side and an expression of courteously suppressed amusement on his face, as if my presence on the steps of the Army and Navy Stores was one of those inexplicable freaks of chance for which it is hopeless to seek to assign any reasonable law.

I gave him a few seconds to digest his astonishment; and then, feeling that the silence was becoming a little embarrassing, I said, inconsistently, "Well, what have you been doing all this time?"

"Well," he replied, "I've been in India, you know."

"Oh, ah!" I ejaculated, as if it had for a moment slipped my memory. "Why, you went out"—and I hesitated, as though calculating the exact day of his departure.

"Three years ago," he put in shortly, "and quite long enough too."

I ran over in my mind my acquaintances of three years ago, but could recall no trace of a recollection of my new companion; so, to gain time and to gather fresh imformation, I asked "And what sort of a time have you had?"

"Oh, much about the same as before," he answered, with a slightly puzzled air.

I candidly admit that the sensible thing for me to have done would have been to have owned up and admitted that I had forgotten my friend's personality. Unfortunately I am one of those painfully constituted people who shrink with nervous horror from anything in the nature of an explanation; and, in addition, I felt that I had gone too far to cry off without some appearance of insincerity. Besides, he seemed to congratulate himself so warmly upon what he insisted upon looking on as our providential meeting that my lips were sealed, and I felt confirmed in the idea that if I let things slide a little longer his name would recur to my mind.

He had slipped his arm through mine, as we walked along, with an easy sense of goodfellowship, and said, "Of course, you'll dine with me this evening. Now, don't say you are engaged," he added, as I hesitated for an instant between my desire to have more of my companion and my disinclination to dine under false pretences; "you know they'll be awfully disappointed if they hear I have met you and let you off without a long jaw, and I join them to-morrow."

I felt constrained to consent against my better judgment, and added in a playfully solicitous manner, "And how are they all?"

"Oh! they are all tip-top—all except the Colonel," after a pause and with a slightly subdued air. "I don't think he has ever quite got over that affair." Then he added abruptly, "I hope you don't think he came badly out of that business?" His hand seemed to relax its pressure on my arm, as if he was preparing himself for some censure or coldness on my part.

I felt touched by this little proof of his sensitiveness to my good opinion, and pressed his fingers as I rejoined warmly, "I never heard any one speak otherwise than highly of his conduct in the matter."

He stopped and said shortly, "Why, who knows anything about it? I thought you and I had it all to ourselves."

"Yes, yes," I faltered; and added inconsequently, "You know you have been away for some time, old fellow."

It did not seem to fit in very well; but he accepted it as an argument, and said, "There is something in that; but don't let people talk about it. I know he relies upon you and me."

There was something so touching in the reliance of this unknown, that a glow of sympathetic affection warmed my heart, and I resolved on the spot that his confidence should not be misplaced. Come what might, the secret of that old man's life should never be betrayed by me.

We had turned into the Criterion Restaurant for a bit of dinner, and those thoughts passed through my mind as we ate our fish. My companion pondered sadly for a few seconds; and then, shaking himself together as though to throw off an unpleasant train of thought, said more easily, "Now tell me more about yourself and your wife and family."

Before I had time to reflect what might be the result of my disclosure, I blurted out the simple truth, "I have no wife."

He looked intensely surprised as he said, "My dear fellow, I am very sorry. I never heard——" He paused inquiringly, and again I blurted out, "I never had one."

A look of extreme pain spread over his face as he heard this. He leaned across the table, and, laying his hand on mine, said with infinite sympathy, "I see it all; I ought not to have asked you. Forgive me, old fellow, and forget that I have said those words."

I gave him a clammy hand and turned away, lest he should detect the conscious guiltiness of my face. I had become confirmed in a suspicion that had been gradually dawning upon my mind, that I had never set eyes upon my host before that day, and that I had been carried away by some inexplicable chance resemblance to some remote acquaintance and by his own apparent cordial recognition of myself.

There was no blinking the facts, however. Everybody that he mentioned was a total stranger to me; whilst every incident that I mentioned with a view to drawing him out seemed to find his mind a blank.

The dinner was good, the wine excellent, and my host geniality itself. We sat late, and drank freely, and over our cups I blush to think of the people I married, the old friends I buried, and the characters I took away. But he *would* have news, and what was I to do? Much of my information seemed to afford him matter for astonishment, and often he ejaculated, "You don't tell me so," as I conveyed some specially startling piece of news.

However, the time for departure came at last, and my mind was torn with conflicting desires to escape detection and to ascertain his identity. "You'll come and see me," he said cordially, as we parted.

"Yes, certainly," I replied; "but where are you putting up now?"

"Oh, the same old quarters," he returned.

"What is the best way to get there?" I asked as a last hope.

"You can't do better than take a cab," he said; and we parted, never to meet again.

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